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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Coexisting

By Hyun Jung Lee

Aug 2005

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Date: Sep 21, 2005

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Introduction

This thesis reveals the growth of the aesthetic and technical vocabulary for my recent art work. I realize that everything in the world, whether it is something small or a big, has as its basic starting point tiny uniting elements like atoms. To compose a molecule of water, we need two hydrogen and one oxygen atom. Like this formula, every composition in the world requires many small units for the construction of a community. I have found that this principle of composition is an important basic philosophy in my metal work.

Henry Moore emphasized an artist's social role by saying that they should reflect the society and the time in which they work. I, as an artist and a person in this society, have tried to recreate the essence of the community in which we live by understanding and collecting evidence from everyday life.

My art represents the essential features of life. I want to express the circle of human life; that no one can exist entirely without others. I create a

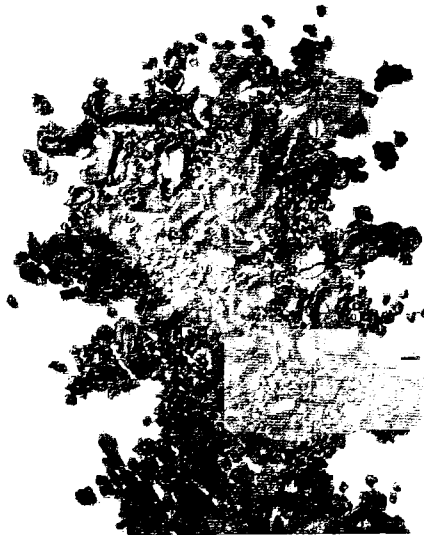
scene in which each characteristic person comes together in a proper place and balance to reflect coexistence.

My sculpture and my jewelry/wall composition represent the freedom of individuality, the desire to take a position in the community, and the power of this community. My figurative forms include in detail parts of the human body. These parts are simplified and exaggerated expression. It is not an important issue if these bodies are male or female. They are there only as vehicles of life and as units from life.

In "*Coexisting*", over 80 brooches on eight white panels have become more than jewelry. They are to be taken as a part of a greater sculptural composition. Here, I emphasize the theme of coexisting by gathering various units. By revealing movement to express each individual human life, the units ironically reflect the isolation of human beings. While all kinds of human beings compose a community, living in it together, they also experience unavoidable loneliness. That is the human condition.

Philosophy and Background

The gathering and repetition of similar human figures has always been an object of aesthetic curiosity and artistic inspiration for me. (Figure #1, #2)

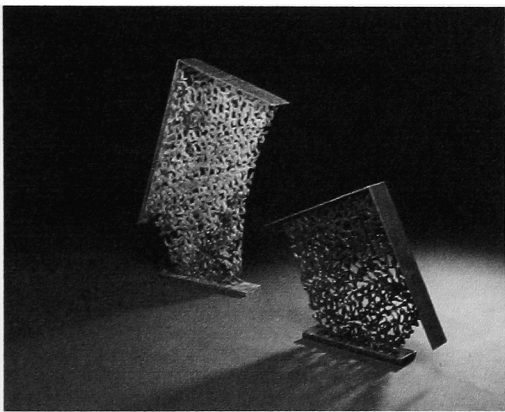


<Figure 1> The birth of bubble, by Satoru Hoshino

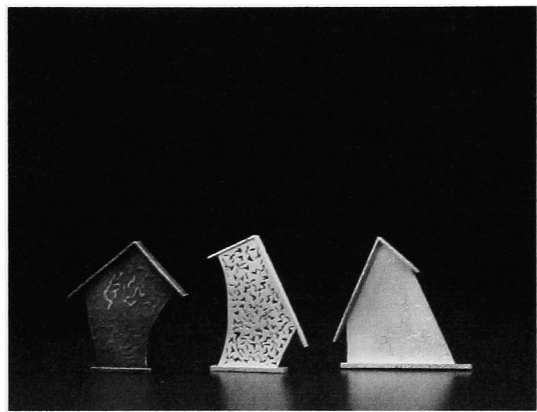


<Figure 2> The crowd, by Ung_No Lee

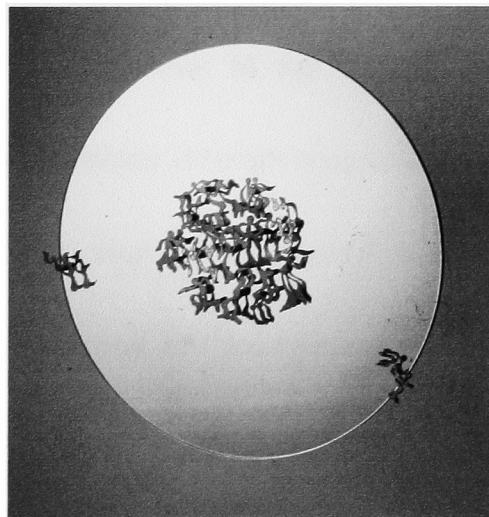
My early works exhibited figures of humanity gathering and were created by piercing the metal to create the images. It can be said that the early compositions are very simple. (Figure #3, #4, #5)



<Figure 3> The closed house I, II



<Figure 4> The closed house III-1, 2, 3



<Figure 5> In my world

I was born and raised in a big city, Seoul, Korea. My family is large. There were always many family members and other people around me in my youth. It was very natural to have an interest in people and have them as the intimate part of my life. In addition the emotional experiences and short stories of people interacting was a fascinating subject for me. I wanted to express the fact that I could not know all the life stories of these human beings. There were many underlying stories in their lives which were beyond my understanding.

Sawing is one of the basic techniques for metal crafts. This technique requires time and patience. Whenever I produced art in this way, I was given enough time to think of my artistic philosophy. The working process developed a discipline through repeated labor and endurance.

When I decided to study in the United States of America, I was filled with determination to extend my expressive vocabulary by acquiring new techniques and experience. My passion to develop hammering techniques, which were not familiar to me, led me to the Rochester Institute of Technology. I had come only with excessive tenacity to learn something

new. Learning new things was a challenging experience for me as I had a fixed working style. I did not know how to deal with it. Indeed, the linguistic barrier in the unfamiliar environment imposed a limit to my social skills. The absence of deep interaction between people created in me a sense of isolation even though I was surrounded by many people. Experiencing misunderstandings with people from using the wrong words and unskillfully making excuses for the mistakes, led me to be afraid of having a conversation with people. I lost my self-confidence. I kept my feelings locked deep inside and did not want to come out for sometime.

I enjoy associating with people and feel secure in a crowd, but I am very reluctant to reveal my most inner self. The excessive desire for new work, and dealing with frustration was an unfamiliar emotional experience. Loneliness and a sudden change of lifestyle were stressful to me. I did not have any idea how to come out of my self-imposed prison. I felt like a weakling and discovered another facet of myself that I had never known before.

I have since taken notice to people's emotional expression as

separate from spoken language. Instinctive gesture or movement, facial expression, or laughter conveys their feelings. This encouraged me to consider another way to interact with people. I have explored the information that I received from observing others as if I were doing a jigsaw puzzle. As I started to use this alternative way to communicate with other people, I was able to reflect on my inner self in a new way and look back on my life. This process immediately began to heal my wounded heart. It became an opportunity for personal growth. I began to construct new relationships with people by concentrating on hearing and observing them rather than speaking.

One day,
Being alone doing nothing,
Becoming nihility,
Can not say anything,
Feel my heart is about to burst,
Falling my tears,
Want to meet somebody to hear my self,
There is nobody to see

I thought, I have many friends of mine around me
When I miss someone who wants to see me like today,
Looking my notebook to find one name and number to call,

There is no one.

Life is alone sometime,
Walking down street and resting my heart,
Having a cup of coffee.

Ah, Life is
Sometimes lonely like this...¹

When I read the poem above, I totally sympathized with it. Like the poet, everyone feels sudden loneliness at some time in life. We want to believe that we are always in a group and never alone, but when we feel lonesome and need someone's warm hands, sometimes we realize that there is no one who can share that loneliness. Everybody is alone even though many people share the same situation. I wanted to drag out such emotions from my own experience and shape them into my art work using my hands.

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where

¹ A coffee on a day: a Korean poem, author unidentified

it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other human effort, undergoing, and achievement. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine art. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.²

Each moment collectively forms a person's entire life. My momentary experiences become a patch work unit that defines my art, pieced together like a quilt. This thesis was born from the point of recognition that I am but a small part of the universe. There are many people around us, though we do not recognize them individually. We take their existence for granted, just like the air we breathe. They have their own language, character, and lifestyle just as we all do. There is no perfect existence without others; numerous small units, time, and experiences together compose the world. This is an important philosophical basis of my art as well as my life.

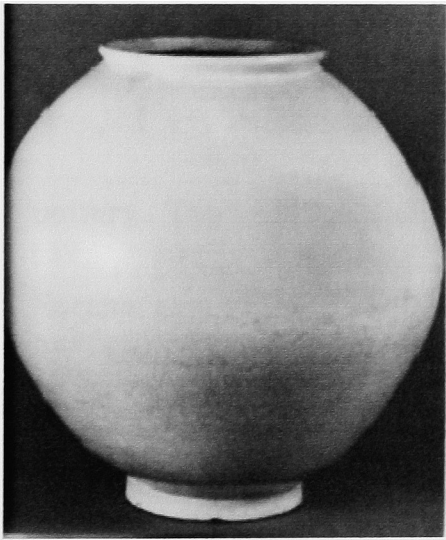
² Dewey, John. Art as experience. New York: Capricorn Books, 1959, p. 3

There are many human figures represented in my art that reflect people who share the same time. These people form a group, live in harmony, and are ironically isolated by their own ways. These people do not present their inner selves by speaking, yet have thousands of stories to tell. Each human unit is stitched as a part of the quilt. I want to emphasize my life as but one unit within the group. I desire the safe status of belonging to a community and of not being alone. I also want every viewer to consider the fact that we are all living in the world together and to try together to make small changes to evolve a better world.

Inspiration

1> Cultural inspiration

The ancient pottery of Korea reveals to us the elegant beauty of moderation without decoration. This characteristic is specific to Korean art. My Korean ancestors produced healthy art by keeping the natural properties of the material and excluding unnecessary decoration. Their spirit is found in the work.



Large jars such as this are distinctively Korean in the sculptural simplicity of their robust, pure forms, allowing full attention to the irregular body and “hidden” beauty of the blushed-tones glaze ³ (Figure: #6)

<Figure 6> White Jar-White porcelain

³ Kungnip Pangmulgwan (Korea). Five Thousand years of Korean ART, San Francisco:

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1979, p.179

#200 “Jar – White porcelain”

Yi Dynasty (17th~18th century A.D) / H: 42.7cm / National Museum of Korea

The explanation above of a simply crafted jar reveals the spirit of Korean art. White porcelain was developed in China and then was introduced for use by the royal family of Korea.

During the 16th century A.D Korea was the only country who could produce the white porcelain apart from China. At that time, the Confucian dignitaries and scholars tried to define the principles of Korean spirit. This movement encouraged making fine white porcelain of graceful and noble forms.

I am most influenced by the simple and pure beauty of Korean pottery. The contour and shapes of the pottery feature flowing lines. The Korean national philosophy of beauty was to make every shape somewhat round. Yanaki Muneyosi(柳 宗 悦 - やなぎ むねよし) defined the character of Korean art:

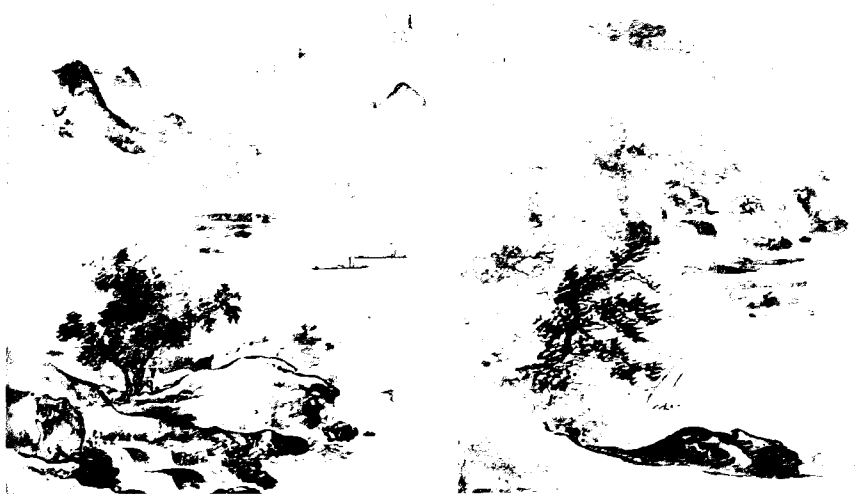
It revives the spirit of the things by letting it be without any objective motive. There is no intention and delusion. It is not deliberate. It reminds me of a person who has sincere faith. There is something beyond human beings. Therefore, it can only be explained in a limited range with human language. There is something mysterious in it. I believe that is the origin of its beauty.⁴

⁴ - やなぎ むねよし. [李朝陶磁の 七不思議]. 1959, p. 219

(Yanaki Muneyosi. [The seven mysteries of the pottery of the Yi dynasty]. 1959, p. 219)

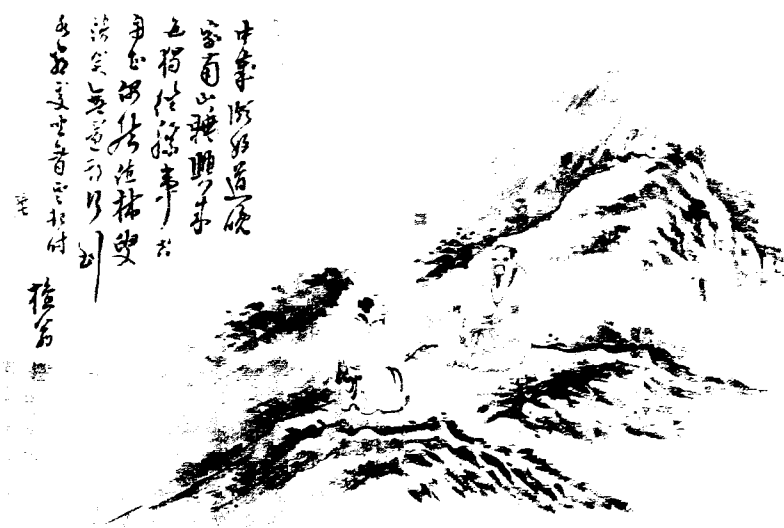
Korean art is not delicate but it is peaceful. It is not precise but it is warm and calm. The subtle techniques create a graceful beauty. Those simple characteristics from my Korean culture led me to create sculpture with gentle surfaces and roundish forms by using hammer forming.

I am also interested in old Korean paintings. They exhibit empty space within which the subjects emerge from the picture. The paintings appear as though there are no lines of demarcation throughout the space. The harmony between empty space and the objects helps the viewer to freely sense beauty.



<Figure 7> *Autumn Moon Over Tung-t'ing Lake* and
Night Rain on the Hsiao and Hsiang River, attributed of Myoung Guk Kim

I believe my ancestors regarded that harmony in space and subjects as an important element in beauty. Dynamic and dense, the black ink lines capture a stream of feelings and movements. The combination of each stroke of the paint brush creates beautiful Korean paintings. (Figure #7, # 8)



<Figure 8> *Chatting on the Southern Mountain*, by Hong do Kim

Without sound these works convey a rhythm and beat. My Korean ancestors lent a harmonious chord to their art. Their spirit is captured in painting, pottery and other forms of art through the use of simple techniques.

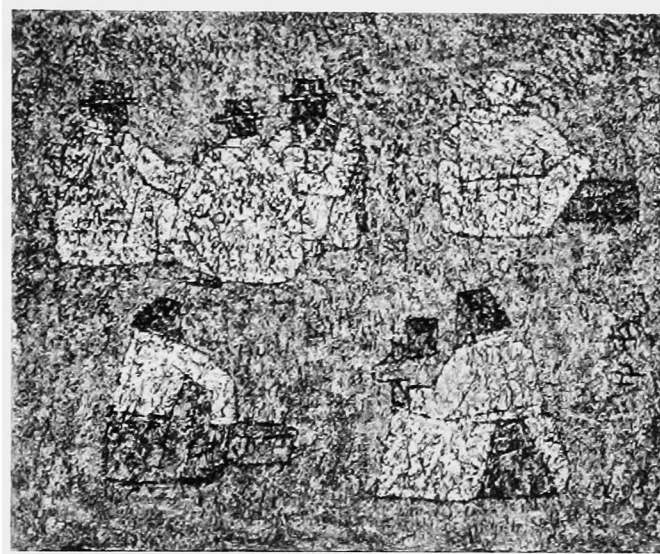
My wall compositions and sculptural forms emphasize the contrast between spaciousness and massiveness by gathering and spreading units. This work exhibits the existence of a mass which is stronger when shown in the same frame and at the same time. The harmony of strength and weakness from the gathering and spreading of units is revealed.

Rhythm and movement is a metaphor for human life in that every human being has character and a lifestyle. Each plays a role in proper position. I try to convey the living movement of my sculpture.

2> Aesthetic Inspiration

When we have a visual experience with an object, the power of its size, patterns and color makes an impression on us. I am fascinated mostly by quantity and repetition of similar units. I am very interested in seeing an image that is created by overlapping or duplication, though the basic unit may not have great individual importance. I am inspired by the paintings that were created by pointillism in Korean and European art. The paintings of

Soo Keun Park⁵, a great artist in modern Korean art, look obscure from a distance. However, if one gets closer, one finds that the picture is a result of a thousand brush strokes. (Figure #9)



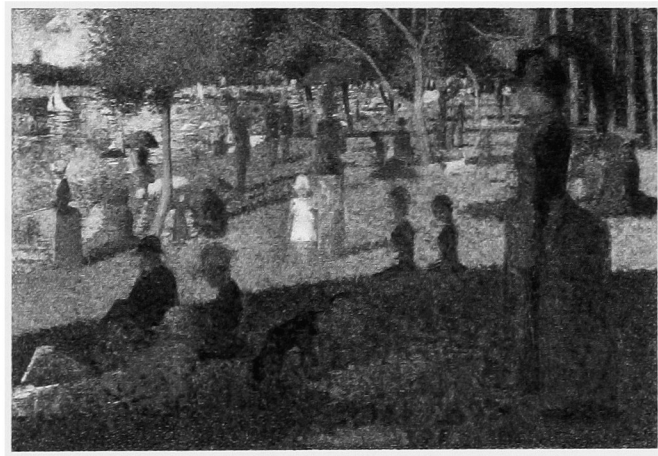
< Figure 9> A Stallman, by Soo Keun Park

In 19th century, a group of French painters, referred to as "Impressionists" tried to achieve new effects with light and color. Instead of blending each subtle shades of color, they applied their paints in bold strokes and splashes. The principle of pointillism reveals the scientific truth that most things in the world are constructed with particles. Georges Seurat tried to turn the color expression from the impressionists' experience into a scientific method. He made a great effort to apply to his art the theory of

⁵ Soo Keun Park (Feb 2, 1914~May 6, 1965) : a Korean painter

light and color that had been the research of physics in his time. He chose colors which were close to the prism light and then he painted thousands of dots with each distinct color choosing not to mix the color on his palette. However, if one sees his painting from a distance, the gathering of small units of color looks like the mixed color. This optical illusion is called juxtaposition mixing. Pointillism makes the picture brighter and livelier.⁶

(Figure #10)



<Figure 10> A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, by Georges Seurat,

I have an aesthetic interest in the repetition and the gathering of similar units. I produce two pieces of work rather than one, and three pieces

⁶ Education research center in Bocheon University. *Art is a new thing*. Retrieved February 03, 2005, from <http://www.educlick.co.kr/openart/MENU07/view.asp?part=02&sn=17>

in a series rather than two since I started to open my eyes to these basic techniques for treating subject matter. I enjoy the process to transforming the original shape when I create series.

My visual interest in collecting subjects and my philosophy of coexistence leads me to pursue the meaning of gathering. I express each divided surface by repetitive hammering just as the pointillist painter uses many brush touches with various colors to create a scene. I also experience the creating, overlapping and erosion of texture by repeated hammering with textured hammers, resulting in a fine surface. This motion reminds me of how human beings are disciplined by the diverse social and emotional experiences in life.

Body of Work

1> Form / Shape – human body

I understand that using the human body as a subject in art has a long history. I believe that art began from people praying for richness, bearing many young or for recording history based on human life. Though art now often acts as a performance and is more self expression, the human figure still remains as an important subject. I, like many artists, am encouraged to create important art in this way.

The human body is the most fundamental unit of vitality in my art. When I started to work with this theme, I had a fixed idea about the beauty of the human body. I was narrow-minded in looking for beauty and life energy from the female body. The male figure did not appeal to me. However, during the process of my study, I could not help using the male form. My observation of the male body helped me get rid of my prejudice. I began to see and draw the male and I started to see their beauty. Male forms become an important part of my artistic life. Men have more dynamic

gestures and their bodies have more contrast than females.

In my art work, the human body was cut into exaggerated fragments. My work appears as an atypical mass, rather than the recognizable body of a human, though details of the bodies are revealed in part. There is no clear female or male form. Specific gender is no longer important in my art. Each component just exists as a life form. The conception of my art is given birth by each small unit that helps to create wholeness in the composition.

2> Movement- communication

Each human element exhibited in my art presents a unique gesture. This is one of the main themes in my art work. Every human being communicates a way of life and a unique story. Each individual story is presented in a most basic form of expression. (Figure #12-1, #13-1, #14-1, #17)

The movement is a language without sound and a pure expression having no boundaries. Language itself is not enough to express the beauty of

nature or the experience of life. I realized that fact by my own experience.

Language comes infinitely short of paralleling the variegated surface of nature. Yet words as practical devices are the agencies by which the ineffable diversity of natural existence as it operates in human experience is reduced to orders, ranks, and classes that can be managed. Not only is it impossible that language should duplicate the infinite variety of individualized qualities that exist, but it is wholly undesirable and unneeded that it should do so. The unique quality of a quality is found in experience itself; it is there and sufficiently there not to need reduplication in language.⁷

The “*Moving Silence*” series was created from my desire for movement as the instinctive way for expression. There is no information which is transferred by language, letter or sound. There are just the gesturing movements of a form. This is truly a pure artistic expression, and a silent way to communicate through my art. (Figure # 11, 12, 13, 14)

⁷ Dewey, John. Art as experience. New York: Capricorn Books. 1959. p. 215

3> Space – a room for only oneself.

My sculptures are three-dimensional compositions which contain negative space and positive space. In the view of morphologic construction, this art could be referred to as a rhythm of volumes in space.

The empty space represents a dream or resting place. The place is where a living being can retreat from a harsh and standardized life. Our civilized society forms human beings in a predictable circle of life. People often dream of a departure from their fixed daily lives. To disengage from an urban life, people often visit a natural place, a private space to experience a memory from the past. This need for space is what I try to offer in my sculptures. Creating empty space is a way to satisfy our desire for restful meditation.

I tried to impart the desire to find a restful place in this life by letting my sculpture engage space within its composition. The movements and contour lines that define mass reveal its language. Empty space that does not have any elements within its boundaries helps create a resting place.

(Figure #12-3, #13-2, #15-2, #16-1)

4> Surface – texture

Metal, as an artistic material, is very attractive and requires a great effort to work. To reach the final destination as a form, technical training, energy and time are required. Hammering is one of the oldest and most basic techniques in metal crafts. It helped me learn patience during the work process as the sawing technique did in my earlier days.

“Breathing” is the first hammered work and from this experience I learned the importance of the effort in creating a piece. As an athlete takes a deep breath before a race, I also readied myself to form a flat metal sheet into three-dimensional form. I experienced a feeling of pleasure from the physical labor. (Figure #15)

My first try in creating a three-dimensional form with hammering exhibits some of my immaturity with hammering skills. Though this skill exhibits some variation, it also began to reveal a harmonious rhythm and flowing contour lines.

In the traditional Asian raising technique, by which I was educated when I studied in Korea, they used only sheet hammering techniques from

the beginning to the end of a project. It was not considered a good way to utilize pattern welding for the making of forms. The welded areas become oxidized after a long period of time and if the surface was colored the traditional way the welded line would be revealed. In the view of traditional craftsmanship, it was not acceptable. However, the welding process I was taught made the work easy and fast. During my new working process, I was learning how to cut and bend a metal sheet, how to weld and how to hammer the surface to shape my sculptural form. This study taught me the way to save time and labor which allowed me to create larger forms.

“Learning Inside” is the work that I created during the period of finding my inner self. I discovered new forms through the awareness of the working process along with the various challenges of my life. As a result this work reveals the interior elements more than the outer details and movements of the human body. I intended to put my inner self, which was being shaped through social experience and awareness, into my art. I tried to express the dynamic changes going on inside me by using various sizes of gold leaf applied to the inside of the sculpture. This application acted as a

metaphor for growth and change. The two holes which look like an entrance and an exit in the rounded shape represent the process of understanding and digesting an event in life. (Figure #16)

The fine surface reflects a collection of small faces which are created by the repetition of hammering. These hammered marks rise one above the other. The fundamental principles of composing a select subject by gathering the basic elements and the collecting the detailed subject matter help to reveal the wholeness of a world. The principle of wholeness is the basis of my art and life. Hammer shaped forms are the way I can technically express and support my artistic philosophy. Beyond the artistic technique of hammer forming is the importance of performing a task through repetition from which I am able to train myself to be a better person in life. Through endurance, boredom, and loneliness, I gained awareness and a reconsideration of myself.

5> Composition – coincidental gathering

A relationship between people is proof of the fact that each one's life is affected by others. Each relationship contributes to the building of the whole world of humans. The philosophy of gathering enhanced my need to create many drawings and of real action models so that each unit became an integral part of the whole composition. The figure drawing class that I had been taking for five quarters helped my concentrated visual study for seeing the details in the human body. I collected drawings from figure drawing class and sketches from my observations in daily life, and started to extract specific postures and movements. I then fashioned characteristic shapes while exaggerating select parts. (Figure #17) For the final images, I cut a pattern from copper metal and hammered each sheet into a volume. To create the various surface colors, I applied patina (liver-sulfur) to the metal over different periods of time.

The final challenge for my artistic composition was how to arrange them in space and to consider how that space would be influenced by the gallery. I need to understand the installation requirements of the gallery

walls. I used eight white panels as an alternative, and then created the composition that I desired on their surfaces. A visual rhythm was expressed in the compositions. Though I could not use the small square space of the wall, I could create a refined composition having the contrast of empty space and gathered subjects on the panels. The panel helped to define my use of scattered forms to create rhythmical compositions. In addition, the distance that each part extended off the panel produced a shadow effect from the play of light. This effect helped to make the gathered imagery stronger by layered shadows. (Figure # 18: pannel No. 1~8)

“Coexisting” is a collection of individual units which have both rhythm and movement. *“Coexisting”* represents the force of human life in a complex and civilized world. It is a reflection of the contemporary life of human beings that occupy a place and a territory similar to the coordinates defined on graph paper. I wanted to recreate various aspects of human life conveying that we are at times oppressed amid the crowd. A person might feel lonely even when gathered within a group of friends. (Figure #19, 20)

Conclusion

I believe that important art will evoke a viewer's response beyond the work's visual beauty. I also believe that to establish communication between the art work and the viewer, there needs to be truthful experience from the depth of the artist's soul.

I desired to create an ideal world by transferring the emotional and social interchange from my life experiences to my art. I hope to share this life experience and then construct a sympathetic communication with other people.

I had once an isolated social experience which caused my mind to be closed while I studied in America. As a result of this wound I lost my focus and wandered for a while. As a result of this experience I took a challenging new step in my life and for my art. I was healed.

The natural characteristics of metal and my ability to develop skills enabled me in this thesis to open my eyes to three-dimensional forms. The challenge of new hammer techniques helped my art forms evolve. I have

grown and matured as both a person and as an artist. My artistic vocabulary has also grown into a new form of expression.

Life and art are tied together in a long journey. The artistic results of this thesis are like a piece of cloth that is a part of a huge quilt which composes my life. Emotional, aesthetic, and social experiences take part in my artistic life. Nothing in the world stands by itself. The world is composed of numerous parts and events. We are all a part of its natural order.

Figure list

- 1> *The birth of bubble*, by Satoru Hosino, 1993
- 2> *The dancing crowd*, By Lee, Ung No, 1983
- 3> *The closed house I, II*, by Hyun Jung Lee, 2001
- 4> *The closed house III-1,2,3* by Hyun Jung Lee, 2001
- 5> *In my world*, by Hyun Jung Lee, 2001
- 6> *Jar*, white porcelain, 17th-18th century A.D.
- 7> *Autumn moon over Tung-t'ing lake* and *Night rain on the Hsiao and Hsiang river*, attributed of Kim Myoung-Guk (died after 1662 A.D.)
- 8> *Chatting on the Southern mountain*, by Kim Hong-do (died after 1814 A.D.)
- 9> *A stallman*, by Soo Keun Park, 1962
- 10> *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, Georges Seurat, 1884-86

Work list

- 11> A Moving Silence I, II, III
- 12> A Moving Silence I (12-1:back /12-2:detail /12-3:detail)
- 13> A Moving Silence II (13-1:side /13-2:detail)
- 14> A Moving Silence III (14-1:side /14-2:detail)
- 15> Breathing (15-1:side /15-2:detail)
- 16> Learning Inside (16-1:side /16-2:detail)
- 17> The process of Coexisting
- 18> Coexisting 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 on panel
- 19> Coexisting – Detail
- 20> Coexisting – an image for the postcard
- 21> The whole view of the gallery



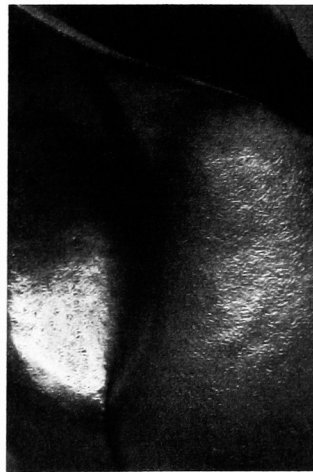
<Figure 11> A Moving Silence – whole figure



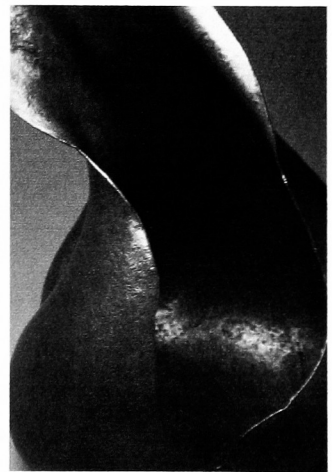
<Figure 12> A Moving Silence I



<Figure 12-1> back



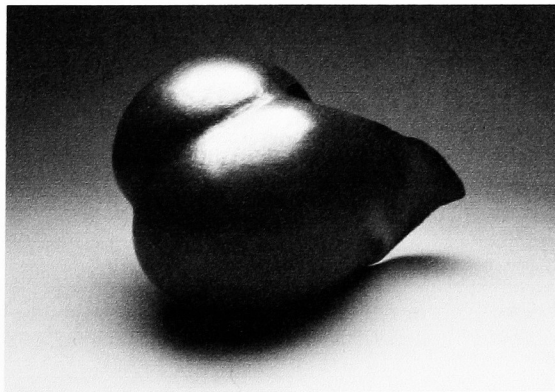
<Figure 12-2> detail



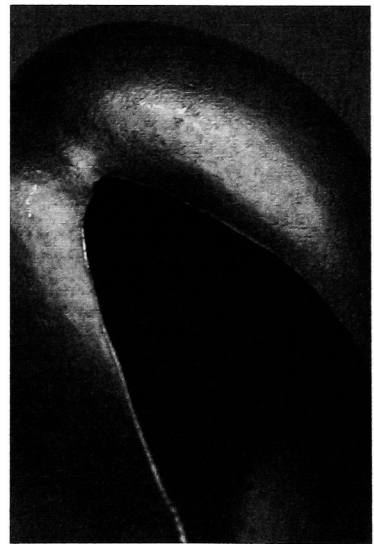
<Figure 12-3> detail



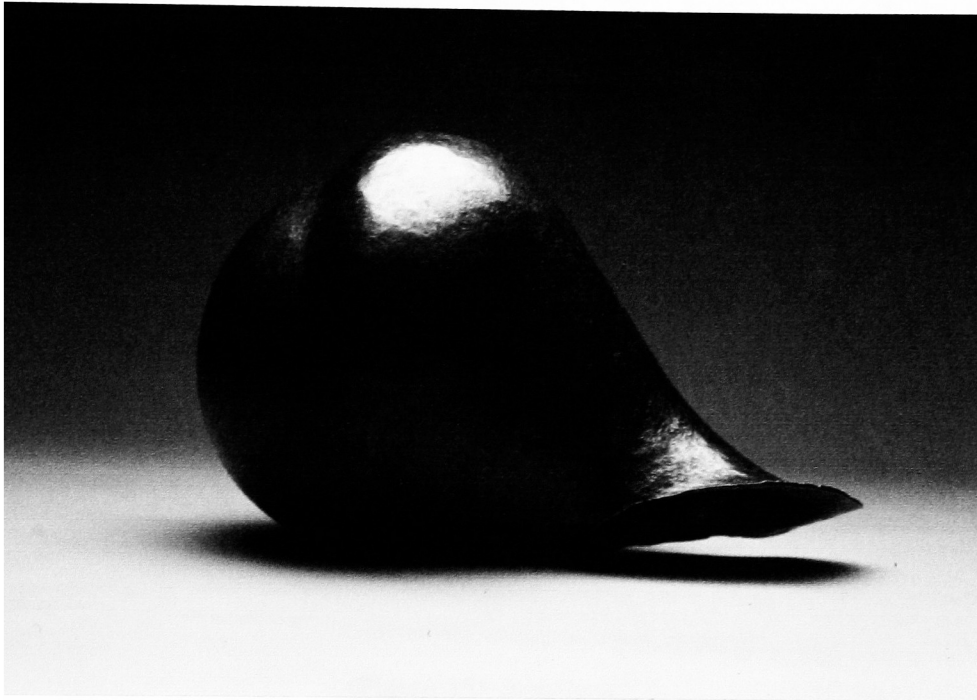
<Figure 13> A Moving Silence II



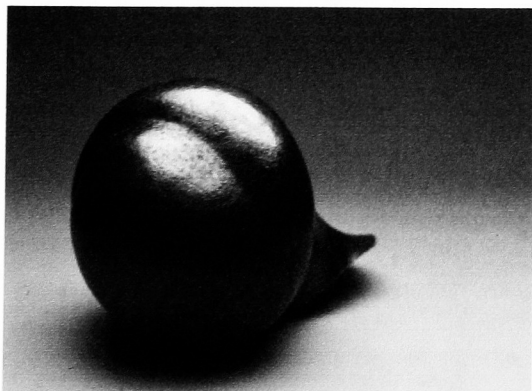
<Figure 13-1> A Moving Silence II -side



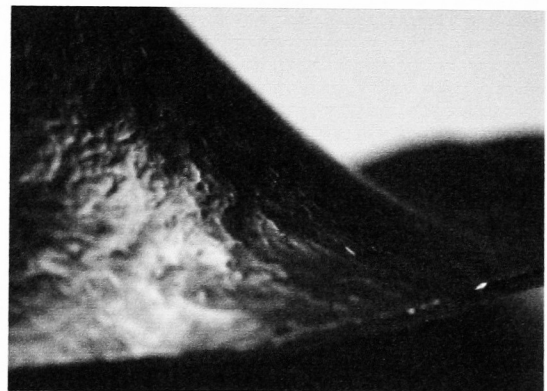
<Figure 13-2> derail



<Figure 14> A Moving Silence III



<Figure 14-1> A Moving Silence III - side



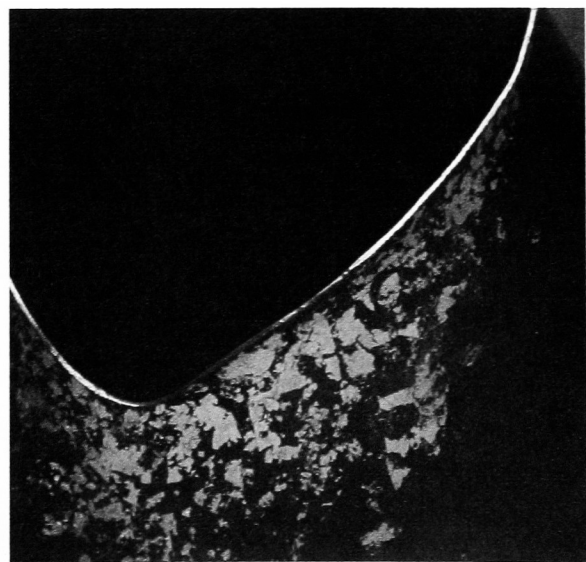
<Figure 14-2> detail



<Figure 15> Breathing



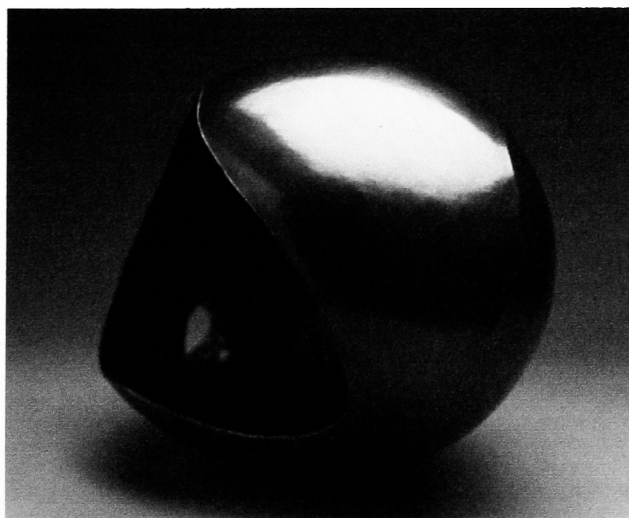
<Figure 15-1> Breathing - side



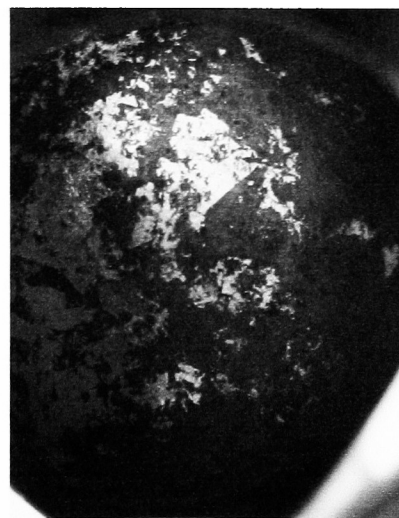
<Figure 15-2> detail



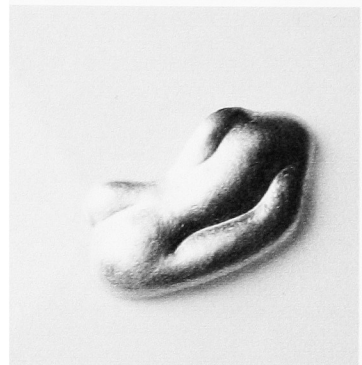
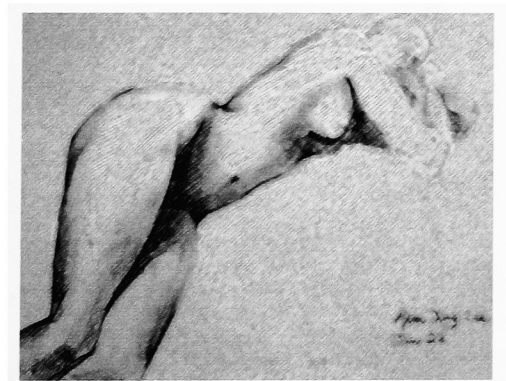
<Figure 16> Learning Inside



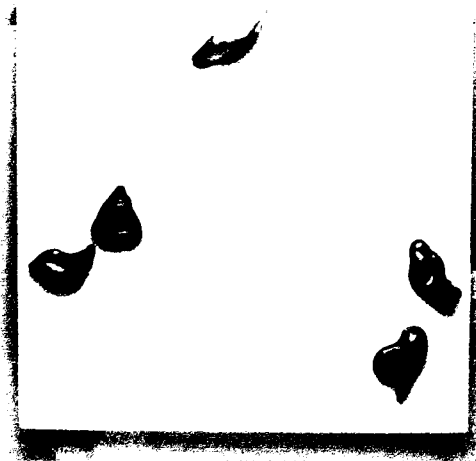
<Figure 14-1> Learning Inside - side



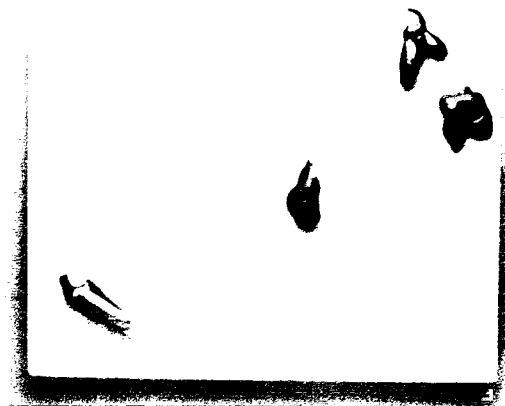
<Figure 14-2> detail



<Figure 17> process of Coexisting



Panel No. 1



Panel No. 2



Panel No. 3



Panel No. 3

<Figure 18> Coexisting on panels



Panel No. 5



Panel No. 6



Panel No. 7



Panel No. 8

<Figure 18-1> Coexisting on panels



<Figure 19-1, 2, 3> Coexisting – details



<Figure 20> Coexisting - an image for the postcard



<Figure 21> the whole view of the gallery

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